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ABSTRACT

Research on attrition of university students has recently examined "dropping out" as the culmination of a complex interactive process. In order to examine differences between successful students (persisters) and students who officially withdrew from a major university, and to examine the accuracy of faculty and staff perceptions of students' experiences, a questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 1,000 currently enrolled undergraduates and 1,200 faculty and staff at the University of Kansas. Students withdrawing from the university during the following academic year were mailed the survey along with demographic questions. The response rates were 53.7% from the persisting students, 32.0% from faculty and staff, and 13.7% from withdrawing students. Analysis of results indicated that withdrawing students had more adjustment difficulties than persisters. Withdrawing students compared to persisters reported experiencing less development of creative potential, coping less well with exams, having poorer study habits, and spending more energy in enhancing social relationships. They also reported feeling lonelier, having more financial difficulties, and expecting greater than realized academic success than persisters. The disparate factor structure of faculty and staff responses and the thematically unrelated items within each factor supported the conclusion that faculty and staff were not consistent in perceiving student needs. Recommendations for enhancing student retention include establishing realistic expectations in college-bound high school students, providing academic skills programs, and educating administrators, faculty, and students about each others' expectations. (LLL)

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Similarity of Students' Experiences and Accuracy of Faculty and Staff Perceptions: Issues for Student Retention

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Running head: Issues for Student Retention

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Abstract

The congruence of persisting and withdrawing undergraduates with their university environment was studied, as was the accuracy of faculty and staff in perceiving students' experiences. Recommendations to enhance student — university congruence and retention are listed.

Similarity of Students' Experiences and Accuracy of Faculty and Staff Perceptions: Issues for Retention

Research on attrition of university students has recently examined "dropping out" as the culmination of a complex interactive process (Tinto, 1975; Spady, 1970, 1971). Tinto characterizes the process of dropping out as "a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems. . . continually modify his goals and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout" (Tinto, 1975, p. 94). Studies examining Tinto's theory validate the claim that the actual experience of college is more important than individual characteristics (e.g. family background, sex, and measured ability) with regard to students' decisions to withdraw or to persist (Terenzini and Pascarella, 1977).

This interactionist perspective is apparent in contemporary theory and research in the student service professions, particularly student development (Chickering, 1969; Prince, Miller, and Winston, 1974), ecosystem design (Banning and Kaiser, 1974; Kaiser, 1972) and the social psychological theories on person-environment fit (Holland, 1973; Pervin, 1968; Stern, 1970). Themes shared by each of these perspectives include the concept of a transactional relationship between students and their environment, shaping and being shaped by each other. A second theme is the belief that there is an optimal level of person-environment fit or congruence that enhances positive learning and development.

Studies examining person-environment congruence indicate that congruence stimulates achievement and results in greater satisfaction and successful coping behavior (Holland, 1968; Pervin, 1968; Walsh and Lewis, 1972). Conversely, poor person-environment congruence is related to reports of increased stress (Huebner, 1975). A corollary of these theories is that withdrawing students experience less congruence with the university environment than do persisting students. If incongruence results in alienation and possible withdrawal, it is important to know what specific problems differentiate persisting and withdrawing students.

Hypotheses

The first part of this study examined differences between successful students (persisters) and students who officially withdrew from a major university. It was hypothesized that incongruence would be reported by withdrawers in the form of more unmet needs and more intense problems than reported by persisters.

The second part of this study examined the accuracy of faculty and staff perceptions of students' experiences. Faculty and staff perceptions are expected to play an important but unknown role in defining the environmental conditions to which students adapt. Students' integration with and committment to the university environment is expected to increase with continued persistence. Hence increasing similarity between faculty and staff perceptions and student experiences are predicted with increasing class level. Exploration of these perceptions should enhance understanding of the person-environment dynamic and of the consequences

consequences resulting from incongruence between student experiences and faculty and staff perceptions.

Method

The procedures of this study were to (1) develop a questionnaire that identified needs and problems of students, (2) assess and compare the needs of persisting and withdrawing students, and (3) assess faculty and staff perceptions of students' experiences using the same questionnaire and determine the accuracy of these perceptions by comparing their responses with persisting student responses.

A set of potential needs for students was generated by interviewing currently enrolled students (persisters), faculty, and staff at the University of Kansas. A random sample of 100 freshmen and 100 undergraduates including freshmen were interviewed by telephone by trained staff. Fifty faculty and staff were interviewed using the same questionnaire.

Survey questions were generated, refined, and condensed to a list of 68 items set in a Likert-type format. This questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 1,000 currently enrolled undergraduates and 1,200 faculty and staff at the end of the academic year. Students withdrawing from the university during the following academic year were mailed the survey along with demographic questions. Experiences of students were elicited by using first person pronouns in the questionnaire. Perceptions of students were elicited from faculty and staff by using "students" as the object of questionnaire items.

Results

The perceptions of persisters and withdrawers were compared to examine their experience of the same university environment. Dissimilarity was defined as a satistically significant difference in mean response to the same question ($p < .01$).

The accuracy of faculty and staff perceptions of student experiences was examined by comparing mean scores of persisting student responses with faculty and staff responses. Factor analyses of items were completed for each group to acquire another comparison of group responses.

A response rate of 53.7% was achieved from the persisting students after a follow-up letter and second questionnaire was mailed to non-respondents. The sample was distributed in nearly the same proportions by [illegible] level, sex, school of enrollment and residence as was the population of university during that semester.

The response rate for the faculty and staff was 32.0%. Full professors formed the largest subgroup (34.7%) followed by assistant and associate professors, unclassified staff, instructors, and lecturers. Years of employment at KU ranged from one to 33 years with a mean of 10.3 years. The mean number of students seen per semester in class was 87; the mean number seen in other settings was 94.

The response rate for withdrawing students (N = 207) was 13.7%, a lower than desired rate. Undergraduates, liberal arts and sciences students and women were over-represented in the sample compared with the population of all withdrawers. Factors listed as contributing to withdrawal decisions included personal reasons (38.0%), job conflicts

(25.5%), and financial limitations (22.7%). Other reasons mentioned by fewer than 20% of the sample included being too far behind in course work (18.3%), changing career decisions (16.3%), family issues (14.9%), poor grades (7.7%) and tests (2.9%). The proportion of students indicating definite plans to enroll at a college or university by the beginning of the following academic year was 73.8%.

Similarity between Persisting and Withdrawing Student Needs

There were 15 items to which at least 35% of the persisting students responded in a direction indicating a need or problem. This result suggests that a large number of persisters encounter some difficulty with specific aspects of their environment. Aspects of their university experience which were problematic include enrollment difficulties, problems in balancing academic and social obligations, burdensome required courses, vague teacher expectations, an incomprehensible administration, demanding living arrangements, and unexpectedly difficult tests.

There were 20 items on which at least 35% of the withdrawers indicated a moderate or strong need. Of these items, 12 were needs identified by the persisters. Problems unique to withdrawers include greater satisfaction studying subjects of the students' choosing, an expectation that college would be easier than it was, difficulty in working and attending school, expecting better academic success than was realized, financing educational expenses, unclear career goals, a sense that hard work is not rewarded, and inadequate development of students' creative potential. On those items common to both groups, a greater

proportion of withdrawing students identified those items as needs than did persisting students. These results suggest that withdrawing students have more unmet needs and report more intense problems than do persisters.

The similarity of persisters and withdrawers was also examined by comparing the mean responses for both groups on each item. A significant difference between the group means was observed for 11 items (Multivariate F (68,667) = 2.76, p <.001). Table 1 lists the items with probability values less than .01. Withdrawing students agreed less strongly than did persisters with statements that their potential as bright, creative persons was being developed, they coped well with exam-related stress, their study habits were adequate, and they spent much time and energy learning to get along with others. Withdrawers agreed more strongly than did persisters with statements that financing school expenses was a problem, they felt lonely, they expected greater academic success than was realized, they needed to take more initiative in planning their futures, ignoring social and cultural events was necessary for academic success, high school did a poor job of college preparation, and college attendance was influenced by friends. These results also support the hypothesis that the needs of withdrawing students are less likely to be met satisfactorily.

Insert Table 1 about here

A principal-component factor analysis with iterations and varimax rotation was completed separately for persisters and withdrawers. Five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 emerged for persisters. They

were labeled (1) career uncertainty, (2) academic adjustment issues, (3) study habits efficacy, (4) system responsiveness, and (5) attendance reasons. These factors accounted for 28.5% of the total variance.

Similarly for withdrawers, 5 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 emerged. They account for 30.0% of the variance. The factor structure for both groups was quite similar suggesting common dimensions to their experiences. While the manner in which they construe their experiences is similar, the results support the hypothesis that marked differences in satisfaction and congruence with the university environment differentiate these groups.

Accuracy of Faculty and Staff Perceptions

The second major issue explored in this study involves the accuracy of faculty and staff in perceiving student needs. A significant difference between faculty/staff and persisters' means exists for three-quarters of the items (Multivariate F (68,847) = 36.903, $p < .001$). The extent of these differences suggests that faculty and staff members are inaccurate in perceiving persisters' experiences.

Faculty and staff were accurate in perceiving that the creative potentials of students are being developed, students find required courses more burdensome than useful, it would be difficult for students to work and attend classes, students expect teachers to make classes interesting, students handle exams well enough, and there is more to succeeding at KU than learning to manipulate the system. Their perceptions are accurate while disagreeing with items that state students find too few places to meet others at KU, students find professors hard

to contact out of classes, students fear college won't be worth as much as expected, and students sleep too much.

Table 2 lists the 15 items on which the faculty and staff were least accurate in perceiving student needs. Persisters assert more strongly than faculty and staff that they take action to ameliorate dissatisfaction, they have clear career goals, they come to school to prepare for a specific career, the campus is primarily a site for academic involvement, they are capable of succeeding academically, and they need to take more initiative in planning their futures. Faculty and staff agreed more strongly than persisters with statements asserting that students selected college because of friends, increased freedom is a problem, not knowing what to major in is a concern, college was expected to be more structured, grades are more important than learning, pressure from parents is a major factor in continuing enrollment, participation in class discussions is difficult for students, and students attended college because they had no other plans.

Insert Table 2 about here

Class level differences were examined by completing one-way analyses of variance for all questionnaire items. Of the 18 items on which class level differences were observed ($p < .01$), seniors were in less agreement with faculty and staff than were freshmen on 15 items; seniors were in more agreement on one item; while no trend was apparent for two items.

The similarity between the factor structures of the faculty/staff and student groups provides another measure of perceptual accuracy. The

items comprising the faculty and staff factors are unlike the items comprising the student factors. The items within each factor do not appear to be thematically related, unlike the student factors. This suggests that the aggregate perception of students is comprised of a multitude of disparate views.

Discussion of Results

The first part of this study identified a variety of unmet needs and problems. Enrollment difficulties, problems in balancing academic and social obligations, burdensome required courses, and vague teacher expectations emerge as university characteristics with which more than 35% of the persisting students expressed concern. As incomprehensible administration, demanding living arrangements and unexpectedly difficult testing were other concerns.

Withdrawing students emerge as having more adjustment difficulties than do persisters. They stated they experienced less development of creative potential, coped less well with exams, had poorer study habits, spent more energy in enhancing social relationship, felt lonelier, had more financial difficulties, and expected greater than realized academic success than did persisters. The number of needs and the magnitude of problems reported by persisters supports the hypothesis that the experience of college influences student retention. A most notable result is that persisters and faculty agree that the development of creative potential occurs; withdrawers disagree. The difference is important from a developmental perspective. Developmental theory emphasizes the self-actualization of students. An obvious concern is

that withdrawing students do not experience the development of their creative potential. Enhancing the retention of withdrawing students appears to pivot on this issue. Targeting students at risk for withdrawal with programs on development of creative potential, exam preparation, study skills and social relationships could help them persist. Dissemination of this information through student service materials in the form of "warning signs of dropping out" along with advertisements for programs to address these problems could be helpful.

While the small return rate from withdrawers requires caution in generalizing these results to all withdrawers, the concerns expressed are in agreement with the literature. A sense of disenfranchisement or alienation from the university as well as the absence of followup contact is likely to account for the low response rate among withdrawing students. Difficulty in contacting some students by mail also contributed to the low response rate.

A factor analysis of persisting student responses identified themes labeled career uncertainty, academic adjustment issues, study habits efficacy, system responsiveness, and attendance reasons. The factor structure for withdrawing students was similar, suggesting that the dimensions of their experiences are common. Addressing the common problem areas would enhance the development of both groups. To the extent that all students face some degree of career uncertainty, academic adjustment issues, study skill deficits, and ignorance regarding university structures and functions, programs addressing these issues could enhance students congruence with university and their persistence.

The second part of this study examined the accuracy of faculty and staff in perceiving student needs. This previously unexamined aspect of the student-environment dynamic illustrates the transactional nature of this relationship. The large number of items on which faculty and staff perceptions and student experiences were different reveals notable perceptual inaccuracies. A consequence of these inaccuracies may be student dissatisfaction which results from a sense of incongruence or alienation from the faculty and staff. Accurate faculty and staff perceptions would place them in a better position to respond sensitively to students needs. Inaccurate perceptions may hinder the faculty and staff's capacity to nurture student development because they cannot target nonacademic needs accurately. Student service staff could enlist the aid of faculty as co-participants in enhancing student-university congruence. Sharing these results with faculty and inviting them to develop collaborative programs and to change university functions so as to enhance student-faculty congruence would involve them in achieving a shared goal: student retention.

The disparate factor structure of faculty and staff responses and the thematically unrelated items within each factor supports the conclusion that faculty and staff are not consistent in perceiving student needs. Many of the discrepancies reveal apparent skepticism by the faculty and staff of students' motives and sense of directedness toward college work. Neither friends nor parents play as strong a role in college attendance as faculty and staff expect, nor do many students seem to be as ambivalent toward their major and career goals as faculty

and staff expect. It may be that these perceptions are based on unrepresentative student cortacts.

Sociological theory asserts that students and faculty expectations should become more congruent the longer students persist (Tinto, 1975). This last assumption was tested by analyzing student responses across class level. Seniors were expected to be more congruent with faculty and staff than freshmen. Congruence would result from attrition as incongruent students drop out along the way to becoming seniors, and as they assimilate institutional values. However, these data do not support this hypothesis. It may be that the experiences of more advanced students are unlike the typical concerns presented to faculty and staff by new students; the faculty may base their perceptions on the concerns of new students. As students remain in school, they may not need faculty contact as much or they may seek out only a few selected faculty members.

The extent of the faculty and staff's perceptual inaccuracy suggests a need for increasing both the degree and substance of communication between faculty and students. Particular areas in need of discussion are the motives and commitments students have toward attending a university. Enhanced communication could have broad-reaching implications in other areas. The opportunity to relate informally with students could provide faculty and staff with information to broaden their perceptions while enhancing students' sense of congruence. Student service offices are in an ideal position to provide programs with this as a goal. The recommendations listed below could serve as a starting point to enhance

student retention by student personnel staff and faculty.

Recommendations

1. Establish realistic expectations in college-bound high students of the university environment by informing them of faculty expectations. Such a presentation could be part of on-going recruitment activities by admissions personnel. Brochures directed at high school students and transfers could make explicit the institutional values and expectations.

2. Provide academic skills programs on exam preparation, study skills, and time management. Career development, social skills and information on the structure of the university administration are other topics that could promote retention and congruence. Presentation of this information early in students' academic careers could avert unnecessary withdrawals. Successful interventions at the University of Kansas are administered by the Information Center and Student Assistance Center. These offices provide information to individuals who call in with questions and provide academic skills programs to groups.

3. Educate administrators about the disparate expectations of students and faculty and the consequences of student alienation. Staff development programs could focus on this topic and the ways in which student service providers can help achieve student - university congruence.

4. Educate faculty about student expectations and how these differ from their own perceptions. Emphasizing the goal of student retention can engage the faculty as collaborators.

5. Educate students about faculty expectations and institutional values faculty and administrators possess. Living group and other presentations are ways to apprise students of the consequences of incongruence with university values.

6. Engage students and faculty in discussions of expectations they have of themselves and each other. The goal of such an exercise would be to enhance student identification with the university and to engage faculty in reappraising their perceptions. Student personnel administrators are in an ideal position to coordinate this kind of program.

7. Review the congruence of students and faculty across time to assess changing perceptions of each group. Student needs are apt to change as fewer traditional students compose undergraduate classes. Program evaluation could be achieved by this periodic review.

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Table 1

Items which Discriminate between Withdrawing and Persisting Students

t-value	p-value	Persisters Mean+	Withdrawers Mean+	Item Content
5.13*	0.000	2.4	2.9	I feel my potentials as a bright creative person are being develcped here at the university.
-5.07	0.000	3.3	2.8	Financing my way through school has been a big problem for me.
-3.55*	0.000	3.8	3.5	I feel lonely at KU.
-3.21	0.001	3.0	2.6	Before I came to KU I thought I would do better than I have.
3.14*	0.002	2.3	2.5	Exams are emotionally draining but I handle that process well enough.
3.10	0.002	2.4	2.6	My study habits are good enough to get me by.
-2.93	0.003	2.8	2.5	I need to take more initiative in planning my future.
-2.93	0.004	4.0	3.8	To be a good student you must ignore most social and cultural aspects of the university environment.
2.68	0.008	3.1	3.3	I spent a lot of time/energy learning to get along with people.
-2.61*	0.010	4.4	4.2	A main reason that I came to college is because many of my friends did.
-2.60	0.009	2.9	2.6	I don't think that high school adequately prepared me for college.

*Pooled variance estimates used except for starred t-values; separate variance estimates used for these items.

-1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree

Table 2

Least Accurate Faculty Perceptions

t-value	p-value	student mean*	faculty mean	Item Content
26.02	<.001	4.4	2.9	A main reason that I came to college is because my friends did.
-16.94	<.001	2.7	3.7	When I'm dissatisfied with something at school I usually take action to correct it.
-16.71	<.001	2.6	3.8	I have a clear picture of my career goals.
-14.48	<.001	1.8	2.9	I came to school to prepare for a specific career.
14.34	<.001	4.0	3.1	Having so much freedom has been a problem for me at KU.
13.70	<.001	3.6	2.5	Not knowing what to major in has been a big problem for me.
13.41	<.001	3.3	2.5	Coming out of high school I thought college would be more structured.
13.41	<.001	3.9	2.9	I often believe that I'm not college material.
13.10	<.001	3.3	2.2	The bottom line is ... the grade I get in a class is more important than the materials I learn.
12.61	<.001	4.1	3.2	A major factor keeping me at school is pressure from my parents.
-12.55	<.001	3.6	4.3	Campus is a place where I just go to class; not much else happens here.
12.50	<.001	3.5	2.5	It is difficult for me to participate in class discussions.
11.80	<.001	4.2	3.5	I came to college because I didn't know what else to do.
-10.19	<.001	1.7	2.1	I think I have the brains to make it at KU.
-8.61	<.001	2.0	2.6	I need to take more initiative in planning my future.

*1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree